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By

Jason Alon Kessler

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The Writing Process of “Escher”

APPROVED BY

SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor: _____

Cindy McCreery

Stuart Kelban

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by

Jason Alon Kessler

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Abstract

The Writing Process of “Escher”

by

Jason Alon Kessler, M.F.A.

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SUPERVISOR: Cindy McCreery

The following report details the process of writing the feature screenplay “Escher,” from development of the original idea, historical research, outlining of multiple versions, film analysis, first draft, and re-write.

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Chapter 1: The Idea

I have always loved the artwork of M.C. Escher. His repeating pattern mosaics, paradoxical realities, and visually captivating, mind-bending creations have fascinated me since my early childhood. Perhaps my interest in Escher was instilled in me by my mother who, as a math teacher, admired the mathematical qualities of Escher's work. She would frequently incorporate his art into her lesson plans for her students.

From a creative standpoint, Escher's art evokes a strong visual tone that lends itself well to story-telling in a visual medium. From the moment it occurred to me to write a screenplay about M.C. Escher, I was excited to find an approach that would capture his art and bring it to life in a way that would make the film just as eye-catchingly, mind-bendingly unique as his art.

I also enjoy that Escher's art is intellectual in nature. I enjoy films about intellectual characters, and that promote the value of being different. I thought in choosing a unique, creative, intelligent figure like Escher, I would have the opportunity to make such a film.

Strategically, I thought it was a good idea for my next script to be a biopic. From what I understand, biopics are especially popular in the industry right now. For the past few years, the annual Black List (a list of the most popular unproduced scripts circulating around Hollywood) has included a high proportion of biopics. And several of my industry contacts have advised me to write a biopic.

I think Escher is a particularly smart choice for a biopic. His artwork is widely recognized around the world. But Escher, the person, is a relative stranger. I think this makes for a compelling biopic because it creates a natural sense of curiosity. And curiosity is perhaps one of the most powerful tools in the arsenal of screenwriters trying to get industry professionals

to read their work. That's probably why biopics are particularly trendy right now in the spec script market, because agents, managers, and producers are more likely to be curious about a script if it relates to a topic that is already familiar in some way. For all of these reasons, writing a screenplay about M.C. Escher seemed like a smart strategic choice.

But of course, a historical figure with a body of recognizable art is not enough to make a successful film. There must also be a story to tell -- a compelling, dramatic narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. Before I could know for certain if Escher would be a viable subject for a screenplay, I had to learn more about his life.

Chapter 2: The Initial Research

In order to learn more about M.C. Escher, I read multiple books (including The Magic Mirror of M.C. Escher, Escher on Escher: Exploring the Infinite, and M.C. Escher The Graphic Work) and I scoured countless online sources to get familiar with Escher's art, life, and character. I watched an interview with Escher's son George available on the official M.C. Escher Foundation website. I watched a portion of a documentary about Escher called Met het oog op avontuur by Hans van Gelder available on Youtube. I found a video clip on Youtube of Escher's son George speaking with a small classroom of children. I even had my mother mail me an old VHS tape about Escher called The Fantastic World of M.C. Escher that she used to show her students.

In later chapters I'll share some examples of how certain things I learned during the research phase ultimately influenced specific aspects of the final script. But at the outset, the first main goal of my research was to find an entry point to the story as a whole. What period of Escher's life should I focus on? What specific challenges should he face on his journey? What portion of his life provides a useful canvas to display an arc where he is forced to make difficult, character-defining decisions that allow us to see him grow as a person? The following is a general summary of what I learned about Escher's life.

M.C. Escher grew up in the Netherlands. He was a poor student who had difficulty at school. He went to college to study architecture, but then a professor named Jessurun de Mesquita recognized his artistic talents and encouraged Escher to switch his focus to graphic art. Even at this early stage, Escher was passionate about creating repeating patterns that fit together perfectly. While at school he created a woodcut of eight interlocking heads that formed a

seamless mosaic like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Escher possessed great technical skill, however when he graduated, his final academic reviews found him to be too philosophical and lacking in feeling.

After graduation, Escher traveled to Italy with some friends and instantly fell in love with the beauty of the countryside. He decided to stay in Italy and live there instead of returning home with his friends. He was filled with passion as he sketched the countryside and experienced Tuscany. He eventually met and fell in love with his future wife Jetta. They married, moved to Rome, and had children. During his time in Rome, Escher would go on long hikes in the countryside for weeks at a time, often with a group of artist friends. Escher began to make more money as an artist, but most of his work was more commissioned works for hire or landscapes. He was still far from being a profitable artist, and far from the art that makes him so well-known today.

Around this time Mussolini was rising to power, and one day Escher's son came home from school saying that he wanted to wear the uniform of the Mussolini Youth like the other children. This led Escher to move his family away from Italy, to Switzerland where Jetta's parents were from.

The Eschers were miserable in Switzerland. Escher found the bleak landscape dull and uninspiring, and Jetta found the social life boring. So, Escher convinced a shipping company to give him free passage in exchange for creating several prints. Using the free tickets, Escher and Jetta went on a trip to multiple locations around the Mediterranean. Most notably, they visited the Alhambra in Spain. Escher was mesmerized by all of the intricate repeating patterns he found in the art of the Alhambra. He and Jetta spent days sketching all the patterns they could

find so he could bring them back with him. His visit to the Alhambra deeply impacted him and his art.

Escher showed some of his repeating pattern work to his brother Berend who was a professor of geology. Berend pointed out to Escher that his work had much in common with research in crystallography. Berend provided Escher with some articles and research that further influenced Escher's art.

Escher and his family eventually fled the spread of World War II and returned to the Netherlands. But the War caught up with them and they lived under Nazi Occupation for several years. During that time, Escher's mentor de Mesquita and his wife and son were taken by the Nazis and sent to Auschwitz where they were murdered. Escher recounts how he showed up to de Mesquita's house one day to find it empty with the door broken in, and de Mesquita's artwork blowing around in the wind. He gathered all the drawings he could and found one drawing in particular behind the broken door, stained with a Nazi boot print, that he decided to keep hanging in his studio for the rest of his life. Shortly after the war he arranged for an exhibit of de Mesquita's works.

From what I learned about Escher, I became interested in telling a story that explains how he came to be the artist who created the works that are so familiar today. I was fascinated to learn about the influences that led him to explore his repeating pattern puzzles, and the way that same desire to solve difficult puzzles led him to his works exploring visual illusions, paradoxes, and impossibilities. I also saw the impact that World War II had on Escher. He was a man who felt more inspired and more at home in a foreign country than anywhere else. And the war took away his ability to travel freely. The war robbed him of his ability to find passion and

inspiration from the world around him, and so he was forced to turn inward for inspiration – into his thoughts and ideas. If he remained in Italy, perhaps he would have spent the rest of his days drinking wine and sketching beautiful landscapes. Instead, he fled the boredom of Switzerland, discovered the Alhambra, learned about the math of crystallography from his brother, and became the artist we know today.

Chapter 3: Is Escher a Good Character for a Screenplay?

After my initial research I decided that there was a story to tell. But what did my research tell me about the character? Did the real life Escher provide a good starting point for a compelling character that audiences would enjoy watching for the duration of a film?

What I discovered in Escher was a quirky, thoughtful, under-estimated, humble, imaginative, moral man driven, above all else, by his passion for solving his visual puzzles – a pursuit that seemed important to no one but him. He cared little about making money, pleasing critics, or even achieving artistic beauty in his work. He simply wanted to visually represent ideas that he otherwise had trouble expressing, and he would obsess over it. He would spend weeks hidden away in his study, during which Jetta and the kids knew not to disturb him or make too much noise. But once he completed a work, he was on top of the world, cheery, and playful.

Escher was a man who seemed shy and quiet. Yet when taking the time to write his thoughts, he was quite eloquent and capable of complicated expression. He considered himself neither an artist nor a mathematician, yet ended up becoming a recognizable name in both communities. He bored easily with works that felt redundant, and only wanted to work on a project if it presented a new puzzle for him to solve.

In my opinion, Escher possessed qualities that make him a wonderful protagonist for a film, capturing the delightful essence of the underestimated, overlooked, creative genius. He was an ugly duckling, spending most of his life marching to the beat of his own drum, only to have his great value appreciated later in life. Just like Harry Potter, Bilbo Baggins, Michael Corleone, Neo from the Matrix, and so many other great characters, what made him strange and different was eventually understood to be his greatest strength.

While Escher, the person, provided me with what I needed to create a likeable protagonist for my film, I still needed to figure out the nature of the fictional character for my screenplay. When it comes to character, one of the most important lessons I learned during my time in the M.F.A. program relates to how to make sure the protagonist has a compelling character arc in which the audience gets to witness the character's growth from beginning to end.

I often see scripts or films where the main character changes in a superficial way that feels cheesy or tacked on to a story that otherwise feels unrelated to that change. In those cases, the change feels more like it is imposed on the character by the writer rather than naturally arising in the character from the events that the character experiences. But over the past two years, I started to notice that in my favorite scripts and films, the central plot repeatedly forces the main character to make active decisions that serve as key moments to highlight one particular question about a specific character trait of the protagonist. How the protagonist reacts to these key moments is what allows us to track the protagonist's progress throughout the script and witness the change.

Later chapters go into more detail about my process of creating a character arc for the fictional version of Escher, including how I changed my conception of the fictional character over the course of the process of writing the script. But throughout the process, it was important to me to find a way to tie Escher's character arc closely with the central plot as described above.

Chapter 4: The First Outline

Satisfied by my research that M.C. Escher possessed all the raw materials that I needed to write an amazing screenplay, I created an initial outline to share with my professor and classmates. The full outline is included below as Appendix A, but the general shape of the film begins when Escher is a student at school, follows him as he moves to Italy and falls in love with Jetta, raises a family in Rome, moves to Switzerland, visits the Alhambra, and moves to Nazi-Occupied Netherlands where his mentor is killed by the Nazis. Then the film ends with Escher finally finishing his work *Metamorphosis II*, an elaborate collection of repeating patterns that morph into each other.

In this outline, Escher's main arc is all about discovering who he is as an artist. In the beginning we see him at school make the active choice to pursue his passion and study art. But then, we discover that his true passion isn't necessarily how others define art. He is driven by his own personal fascination with repeating patterns. To him, art is about expressing an idea that is difficult to express. When he lives in Italy, we see the tortured artist side of him as he goes for long trips in the country-side to think. Like so many creative geniuses, the process he needs to go through to wrestle with his thoughts and ideas is not a straightforward, easy one. He explores, and meanders, and chases inspiration. And this sort of exploration necessarily requires escape from the real world. Escape from worrying about money or the opinions of critics. Even escape from his family. But ultimately he cannot escape the encroaching ways the world is changing politically, and the approach of World War II interferes with his ability to ignore the world and focus on his art.

In some ways, this version of the film is about Escher's goal of finding the inspiration to solve his creative puzzles, while a deteriorating society increasingly gets in the way. And ultimately, after that society takes Escher's mentor away from him, only then does Escher finally create his repeating pattern work *Metamorphosis II*.

My professor and my classmates provided helpful feedback. They overwhelmingly agreed that my outline spanned too long of a time period. And the story of Escher's internal struggle with boredom and lack of passion that led to his artistic transformation simply did not provide high enough stakes to interest my peers. They wanted to see a more contained period of time in which Escher faces a specific challenge with higher external stakes.

I accepted the feedback of my classmates. I acknowledged that my view of the materials was likely biased from the outset by my greater than average fondness for Escher as a historical figure. Plus I had just completed a deep research dive into Escher's life which increased my bias and gave me an even greater affinity than the average viewer for a broad story spanning a significant portion of Escher's life. But my professor and my classmates reminded me that a film, at its core, must tell an interesting dramatic story on its own, without being subsidized by intellectual curiosity in the subject matter.

From what I understand, my initial inclination to span much of his life is a common affliction among writers attempting to write biopics. It seems to be conventional wisdom that when writing a biopic it is best to avoid long spans of the character's life, and instead focus on a contained dramatic story that unfolds over a short period of time. So, with this feedback in mind, I turned back to my outline and attempted to create a new version that focused in on a more limited period of his life.

Chapter 5: Additional Research – Escher Under Nazi Occupation

The time that Escher spent living in the Netherlands under Nazi Occupation seemed like a good discrete chapter of his life for my screenplay. It has high stakes, dramatic tension, and unfolds over the course of a short period of time. It also takes place relatively soon after he began to focus more on repeating patterns, mathematical principles, and artistic illusions, providing me with an adequate body of existing artwork to draw upon. In addition, the death of Escher's mentor occurs during this time period. Escher's first-hand account of discovering that de Mesquita had been taken away by the Nazis stuck out to me from the start as an excellent climactic scene for a film. So, I decided to conduct more detailed research on this particular portion of Escher's life to see if it had the makings of a full story.

I learned a great deal over the course of my research, but the following facts were particularly influential to me in crafting my story. There was a very active Dutch Resistance effort against the Nazis that collaborated with Allied intelligence, fought the occupation, and helped over 300,000 people hide from the Nazis. Escher's brother Berend was a professor at Leiden University and was arrested by the Nazis, then let go and went into hiding. Berend's son Rudolf (Escher's nephew) was a known communist and leader within the Dutch Resistance.

According to Escher's son, he wasn't aware of Escher being an active member of the Resistance, but he knew that Escher supported the Resistance financially. He also said that Escher would take long trips into the country-side during this time to get food supplies from friends who were farmers.

Escher's mentor Jessurun de Mesquita lived with his wife Elisabeth and his son Jaap until the three of them were sent to Auschwitz. There is at least one account that claims that Escher

took in the child of Jewish friends of his and had the child stay with his family during a portion of the occupation.

The highest ranking Nazi leader in the occupied Netherlands was Hanns Albin Rauter who reported directly to Himmler. He instituted a retaliation system against the Dutch Resistance in which one killed Nazi equaled ten Dutch victims. He was severely wounded in an attack by the Dutch Resistance and in response he executed 117 political prisoners. After the war he was convicted of crimes against humanity and executed.

With all of these facts in mind, I began to craft a story in which Escher tries not to get involved with risky activities against the Nazis, but gets pulled into the Resistance by his brother and nephew. I wanted to give him a specific motivation related to his mentor, so I created a grand-daughter of his mentor named Rebecca who is in trouble and needs Escher's help. And as increasing complications require Escher to take active measures, I attempted to make these measures incorporate Escher's art and his unique skills as much as possible.

I created a new, detailed step outline and shared it with the class. Even though it tightened the main storyline to take place during Nazi Occupation and involve Escher in the Resistance, it still leaned heavily on Escher's internal struggles with inspiration as he tries to break through an artistic block and figure out what to create next. And this version of the outline still included extensive flashback sequences of Escher's time in Italy.

In retrospect, while the second outline was an improvement, and the class was happier with the higher stakes storyline, I was still basically cheating – finding a way to include more portions from Escher's life than I should. My professor and many of my classmates expressed

their continued skepticism about the flashbacks, but as the semester was marching forward, I felt it was time for me to dive in and start writing.

Chapter 6: Film Analysis

While I was developing this project through both outlines and the writing of the first draft, I also undertook several film analysis assignments to study specific aspects of other scripts and films to help discover lessons for my script. The first film analysis assignment was to create a list of scripts and films that I felt would be applicable to my script and useful to study. This list is included as Appendix C below.

For the second assignment, I studied the story structure used in an unproduced script called Seuss written by Eyal Podell & Jonathan Stewart. The script appeared on the 2012 Black List and chronicles the early days of Ted Geisel's career and the inspiration his future wife Helen provided for him in creating his first hit The Cat in the Hat.

For my third film analysis, I examined the key character moments for the protagonist of the unproduced script The Woman with Red Hair. This script appeared on the 2016 Black List and was written by Michael Schatz. It is based on a true story and follows Johanna "Hannie" Schaft, a young woman who joined the Dutch Resistance during World War II and became an assassin.

For my fourth film analysis I studied the set up section of the script Girl with a Pearl Earring written by Olivia Hetreed and made into a 2003 film directed by Peter Webber. The story is about a girl who posed for Vermeer's famous painting of the same name as the film in the 1600s.

My fifth film analysis examined the Act II chain of events in Imitation Game a 2014 film written by Graham Moore loosely based on the biography Alan Turing: The Enigma. The script topped the Black List in 2011, and the film was a commercial and critical success, grossing over

\$233 million against a \$14 million production budget. And it won the Academy Award for best adapted screenplay.

For my final film analysis, I went back to The Woman with Red Hair and examined its story resolution. As part of my analysis, I drew the following conclusions about my goals for the resolution of Escher:

“I think the Resolution for my script will be more grounded in a concrete goal for Escher – saving his mentor’s grand-daughter. And he will use his unique artistic and creative skills that have been set-up throughout the script in order to achieve the goal. And whereas he wanted to remain uninvolved in the Resistance in the beginning, and showed great nervousness around danger, in the Resolution he is the only one not giving up on saving the girl, and pushes the Resistance to get more involved – and then leads the action bravely.”

Chapter 7: First Draft Problems – When Things Just Don’t Click

The first few weeks writing my initial draft were brutal. The progress was clunky. The dialogue felt forced. The descriptions were fat and rambling. And the feedback from class was harsh. Each week that I came in with pages to workshop, I left feeling beaten up.

I am absolutely grateful to my professor and my classmates for relentlessly holding me to a higher standard than what I was producing. But after a few weeks I could feel it in the air – the growing sense that maybe my script was just not going to get any better and it was time for them to lower their standards. That is perhaps the worst feeling any screenwriter can experience in a workshop setting, and it stung like the slap-in-the-face wake-up call that it was. That is when I decided, halfway through the semester, to start over.

I spent hours trying to diagnose what was going wrong with the script. There were many symptoms, but I knew that I needed to untangle the root cause. I could tell that there had to be some core problem that needed to be remedied or else every scene would be a struggle. After hours of reflection, I finally figured it out.

While my new direction had put Escher into a higher stakes conflict, requiring him to get more involved in the Resistance in order to save the life of his mentor’s grand-daughter, I had still retained Escher’s internal struggle from the earlier version in which he was searching for artistic inspiration. I was still trying to tell the story of how Escher evolved into the artist he is today. What I finally realized is that those two pieces don’t fit well together.

If our story takes place in a world under Nazi occupation, where people are getting murdered, and Escher’s relatives are bravely risking their lives to fight back, then why the hell do we care what kind of art Escher is making?! It makes Escher an extremely unlikeable

character if he seems to be more worried about his next print than about what's going on around him. Each scene was such a struggle to write because I was making my main character focus on the wrong things, simply because I was holding on to a vestige of how I initially envisioned the story.

In some ways the crafting of a successful screenplay reminds me of Escher's process of creating a repeating pattern of shapes that seamlessly fills a plane. If you start out with the wrong shapes that don't complement each other, then forcing one to fit with the other will always be a zero-sum compromise. The flaws in my first draft were symptoms of my attempt to force together elements that simply don't fit. Escher's struggle to find inspiration for his next piece of art simply did not play nicely with a high stakes story of life and death under Nazi Occupation. The story ingredients were competing with each other. Serving one aspect always came at the expense of the other.

I began to re-imagine Escher's character without the burden of showing him struggle for artistic inspiration. And I removed any attempt to show his evolution as an artist over the course of this story. Once I freed myself up to eliminate this aspect of his character, it allowed me to let Escher react to the beats of this story in a more authentic way. And because the story itself is full of drama and tension, I realized that if I let go of the need to show his evolution as an artist, it gave room for him to evolve as a person. And quite frankly, that evolution is more universal and much more satisfying to witness.

Armed with this new epiphany, I started over. I quickly found the writing process to be much easier. The dialogue felt more authentic. Escher felt more likeable. Each scene required less work to accomplish its purpose. Things started to click.

Below I discuss in more detail some of the specific choices I made and challenges I encountered when writing my first draft. But from that point on things turned around. Feedback from my professor and classmates took a drastic turn for the positive, and I successfully progressed through my first draft. More importantly, I regained my faith that the end product would be something I would be proud of.

Chapter 8: Integrating Escher's Art

One of my main goals in writing this script was to capture Escher's visual style and bring his art to life in a uniquely cinematic way. I believe a key ingredient to the film's success is figuring out how best to integrate Escher's art. I ultimately incorporated his art in several key ways.

I felt it was important to trace the creation of one work over the course of the film. In my research I found that around this time period Escher created a little-known work called *Encounter*. In *Encounter*, Escher makes an interlocking pattern of black figures and white figures that fit together in a seamless mosaic. The black figures are hunched over and grumpy looking while the white figures look more upbeat. Three dimensional versions of the figures break free of the background and march in a line until they meet in the middle where one black figure and one white figure shake each other's hand.

I decided to use *Encounter* as the main work that Escher creates over the course of the script for a number of reasons. First of all, Escher has described the black figures as pessimists and the white figures as optimists who, as two dimensional interconnected drawings, serve as each other's backgrounds and therefore are not aware of each other's existence. But then when they break free as three dimensional beings, they are finally able to meet. I love the deeper explanation behind this piece, and thematically I felt that it works well with a story that takes place under Nazi occupation. In the final script, I repeatedly touch on the theme of optimism and the importance of smiling even in the midst of misery.

In addition, using *Encounter* as a repeating motif throughout the film proved to be a useful device to help illustrate Escher's arc over the course of the film. At certain points in the

script, Escher is directly linked to the pessimist. There is a visual transition in which a sketch of the pessimist becomes Escher walking down the street. And when Escher first shows de Mesquita the two dimensional pattern, de Mesquita jokes that he is the optimist and Escher the pessimist. But then at the end of the script, after Escher works with the Resistance, saves Rebecca, and completes his arc, he finally finishes *Encounter*. In the finished version, he has allowed the optimist and pessimist to finally meet, and Rebecca says to him that the optimist reminds her of Escher.

Encounter was also a useful choice because it plays with the idea of art as an illusion and the difference between two-dimensions and three-dimensions. This is something Escher frequently explored in his art. The script touches on this idea to make Escher's reality feel less real at times, like when Escher is stopped by Nazis at a checkpoint and only overcomes his nerves by imagining the soldiers as two-dimensional illusions, or when Escher witnesses the hanging of ten prisoners and copes with it by imagining the bodies as flat and two-dimensional. And this concept becomes a key ingredient in the climactic sequence where Escher uses a two-dimensional wooden surface to create the illusion of three-dimensions in order to hide Rebecca safely in a rowboat.

Although I was happy with *Encounter* serving as the main piece of art that Escher starts and finishes over the course of the script, it is not one of Escher's better known works. And I believe the film cannot be successful without integrating Escher's best known works. In order to accomplish this, one thing I did was dedicate time during the first ten pages to incorporate images that the audience will be likely to recognize.

In the first ten pages of the script, I show Escher speaking at a lecture to mathematicians about his work *Metamorphosis II*. It features some of his repeating patterns that should be recognizable to many people. And the lecture provides an opportunity to introduce Escher's unique style and approach.

Another piece of work that is introduced within the first ten pages and features prominently in the script is *Day and Night*. It is one of Escher's better known works. It is also one of my favorites. On the left half of *Day and Night* there is a daytime view of a small city and on the right is the mirror image of the same city at night. The night sky transforms into a flock of black birds as it extends to the left, and the day sky becomes a flock of white birds as it flows to the right, with the black and white birds fitting together in the middle like a jigsaw puzzle. When we first see Escher in his house, he's in his workshop creating a print of *Day and Night*. We then see the work again when he delivers several prints of it to his art dealer, and when he gives a copy to de Mesquita. Then we see it again when Rauter looks through it while choosing a print. The popularity (and commercial success) of this print was a useful fact for the scene when we meet Escher's art dealer.

As the script developed, I found the opportunity to use *Day and Night* for two significant scene transitions. First, when we initially see the print for the first time, at the end of the scene we push in on one of the birds in the print and it becomes a real bird in the sky. The bird then takes us to the Jewish Quarter where Escher is on his way to visit de Mesquita. Then later in the script, when Escher is trying to sneak Rebecca past a Nazi checkpoint using an optical illusion, a bird almost ruins the trick before flying off and giving us another transition back to the Jewish Quarter where Escher is visiting de Mesquita's house for the last time and finds that de Mesquita is gone. In the beginning it is the black bird from the "day" part of the drawing. And later it's a

black bird that almost ruins the illusion. But by the time Escher arrives at de Mesquita's, it is the white bird from the night portion of the drawing that takes us there.

Escher has a work called *Hand with Reflecting Globe* that is fairly well known. I wanted to find a way to integrate that piece into the film, but I was having trouble incorporating it in a way that felt organic to the story. It is an intricately detailed print of a hand holding a mirrored sphere in which a warped self-portrait of Escher is visible. I thought I was going to have to settle for not including that one, but then I found my opportunity when Escher meets with Rauter. I had wanted Rauter to buy one of Escher's prints, and *Hand with Reflecting Globe* made sense to me. I think Rauter is a character who would admire technical skill and exactness, and would gravitate to this work over, say, *Day and Night*. Using *Hand with Reflecting Globe* in this way also provided a great device for a scene later in the script when Escher looks at his warped reflection hanging on Rauter's wall while feeling conflicted about his actions.

There are several more works of Escher's that are extremely well known, but were created later in his life, after the time period of this story. But I felt that it would be disappointing to see a film about Escher and not see some of these famous works. My solution was to create a short, surreal sequence that takes place in Escher's imagination. After he devises a plan to help the Resistance re-locate people in hiding, he gazes out the window and imagines what it must be like for the people who are moving to new locations. We enter his imagination and see a surreal chase scene in which a Resistance member sneaks a woman and child to a new location while getting chased by Nazis around impossible landscapes that look like Escher's famous works, such as:

- *Relativity* - where people climb up and down staircases in gravity-defying ways,

- *Convex and Concave* - where Escher plays with perspective to create stairs and ladders that defy physics, and
- *Ascending and Descending* - where people march around an impossible staircase that always seems to go round and round to infinity, its climbers never progressing up or down.

Not only does this imaginary sequence visually invoke some of Escher's most well-known and well-loved works, it also works well for character reasons. At this point in the story, Escher cannot imagine himself being one of the people out there on the ground risking their lives. He gets to sit safely in his house making the art that serves as the maps. As he imagines it, it is unrealistic and fanciful, and ends happily with the people successfully evading the Nazis. But soon after, we see the reality that is faced by those who are re-locating, as the Nazis catch and torture a Resistance member and murder the young woman he was attempting to move. The fact that Escher cannot yet fathom the risk necessary to sneak past the Nazis to try to re-locate someone makes it all the more impactful later in the story when he is willing to risk his life to be the one to personally move Rebecca.

Overall, I am very happy with how I integrated Escher's art into the fabric of the story, drawing on it for plot, character, and thematic elements. I think perhaps it's one of the things I'm most proud of when looking at the finished script.

Chapter 9: Fact vs. Fiction

One question I wrestled with while writing my first draft was how many liberties I could take with the actual facts. As with any biopic, if you stay too shackled to truth it limits the story, but if you stray too far then it starts to feel unauthentic and lose the luster of being a biopic in the first place. During the process of writing *Escher*, I made several strategic choices of when and how to break with verifiable facts in order to serve the story and create the best possible screenplay.

My central dramatic storyline involves Escher getting involved with the Resistance and solving specific problems using his artwork and his craft. As stated above, there is no evidence that Escher actually got involved with the Resistance in the ways portrayed in the script. However, at least in theory it's possible that Escher was more involved in the Resistance than is publicly known. Given the known involvement of his nephew in the Resistance, the arrest of his brother, his financial donations to the cause, and the fact that he would disappear into the country for long periods at a time, I decided that there was an opening in the fact pattern for me to tell a story of what *could* have happened.

Aside from Escher's involvement in the Resistance, which at least could have happened in theory, the most glaring departure from accuracy comes in the form of Rebecca. Rebecca serves a major role in the story. When she is called up by the Nazis, saving her becomes the main goal that drives Escher to get involved with the Resistance, launching him on his journey. However, Rebecca is an invented character. As far as I know, Jessurun de Mesquita did not have a granddaughter who was called up by the Nazis, and Escher did not set out to save any young girl named Rebecca. At least there is an account that Escher took in the Jewish child of his

friends, so there is basis from a character standpoint of Escher's willingness to put himself at risk to help a Jewish child hide from the Nazis.

All of the complications that arise in connection with Escher helping the Resistance and saving Rebecca are all also invented for purposes of the story. In the story, Escher uses his art in creative ways to create coded maps to help the Resistance, and in the climax of the film he builds an elaborate optical illusion that he uses to sneak Rebecca to safety – but all of these key plot moments have been invented.

In the script, when Escher's son gets sick, he turns to Obergruppenführer Rauter and sells him a print in order to get penicillin. Rauter also arranges to have Vermeer's famous painting *The Astronomer* sent to him on its way to Hitler in Berlin. In truth, there is no reason to believe that Escher ever actually met Rauter or that Rauter purchased any of Escher's works. And although Hitler was reportedly a big fan of Vermeer, and *The Astronomer* was seized from a French Jew (as described in the script), there is no reason to believe that it passed through the Netherlands on its way to Berlin.

In order to help prepare the reader for the idea that the script takes some imaginative liberties, I decided to include a note on the cover page that says "Inspired by real (and surreal) events." I believe that "Inspired by" instead of "Based on" implies that some creative liberties were taken. And the inclusion of "(and surreal)" is an extra indication that extensive liberties have been taken. My hope is that this note will be understood to be a nod to the readers that makes them feel on board for the creative journey as opposed to cheated or deceived.

Overall, I think my approach to balancing truth with story-telling came together in a way that serves Escher's story rather than undermines it. In fact, when it comes to the creative

liberties taken with the script, I feel that the re-imagining of reality can actually be seen to have thematic overlap with Escher's art itself. And I am ultimately satisfied that the script brings Escher's art to life in a dramatic and satisfying way. That, to me, is more important than the historical accuracy of the details of his life.

Chapter 10: The Re-write

When I completed my first draft, I was pleased with the result. But of course there was room for improvement. I received many helpful notes from my advisors that I addressed in a re-write. But going into the re-write, there were two major notes in particular that I needed to address:

1. The Rebecca note

In the first draft, Escher never actually meets Rebecca until the end of the script. Rebecca lives in Amsterdam and plays a minor role, appearing in very few scenes. She serves as a plot device more than anything. In the second draft, my goal was to integrate Rebecca more into the story and develop a relationship between her and Escher so that we better understand why Escher cares about her. Escher's entire journey centers on this character, so it was important to flesh her out and make the audience see with their own eyes why they should care about her fate.

In order to address the note, I decided to make Rebecca live with de Mesquita in the beginning. Jessurun de Mesquita actually had a son named Jaap living with him at the time, so I added this character into the script and made Rebecca Jaap's daughter. This allowed me to incorporate Rebecca into more of the scenes in which Escher visits de Mesquita and to deepen her character. It also gave me the chance to show Escher interacting with her, and to create a special relationship between the two. When we first meet Rebecca, Escher brings her an apple and says that his son Jan asked him to bring it for her. He also brings her a drawing that Jan made for her. Later in the story, just before Rebecca goes into hiding, she makes her father wait so she can finish a drawing for Escher to bring to Jan. And Escher suggests that Rebecca take

some drawing supplies with her into hiding. These two scenes are included below as Appendices D and E respectively.

This was an excellent note, and I'm grateful especially to Stuart Kelban for pushing me to accept it. Though these changes impacted only a few scenes, they have a significant emotional effect on the entire rest of the script. I also found that with more emotional investment in Rebecca's character, it allowed me to get great use out of small insert scenes of her at key moments later in Act II in a way that wouldn't have been as impactful or successful without these changes made earlier.

2. The Jetta note

In the first draft, Jetta is fiercely protective of her family and often serves as the voice of reason on Escher's shoulder encouraging him not to get involved in the Resistance. In the second draft, my goal was to deepen Jetta as a character and show more of her redeeming qualities. I accomplished this through revisions to several of the scenes in which Jetta appears. And I also added a key scene in which Escher and Jetta see a woman watch her husband and son get taken by the Nazis. Jetta wants to help the woman, but Escher holds her back, stopping her from interfering. As soon as the Nazis leave, Jetta rushes to comfort the woman. This scene shows that Jetta is empathetic and capable of weighing the interests of others over risk to herself. Then in the very next scene, it is Jetta who encourages Escher to go talk to his brother about getting the Resistance to help Rebecca. These new scenes with Jetta are included as Appendix F below.

Chapter 11: Fade Out

I set out to write a screenplay about M.C. Escher that would showcase his art in a satisfying way. If you were to ask a hundred people to write a script about M.C. Escher, you would probably get a hundred very different stories. I conducted a great deal of research and made several strategic choices in order to find what I thought was the best take possible. As with all creative pursuits, my progress was not without missteps and course corrections. And I relied heavily on the invaluable advice and feedback of my professors and classmates. In the end, I am completely satisfied with the result. I am proud of how the final script weaves Escher's art into the story, integrating it with plot, character, and theme to fit together seamlessly into an entertaining, dramatic, high stakes screenplay. I'd like to think that the process of putting the various pieces together is not unlike the process Escher would undertake to make his repeating patterns. And I truly hope that he would be satisfied with this script.

APPENDICES

Appendix A – The First Outline

M.C. Escher

By Jason Kessler

Logline: As WWII approaches, M.C. Escher must overcome a lack of critical success, growing financial troubles, and a serious crisis of inspiration to reinvent himself from a conventional landscape artist to the quirky genius whose mind-bending art we know today.

ACT I

SCHOOL DAYS IN THE NETHERLANDS

As an architecture student in the Netherlands in 1920, Mauritz Cornelis Escher's artistic talent is recognized by a lecturer named Samuel Jessurun de Mesquita, despite Escher's poor overall student record. Samuel persuades Escher to change courses from architecture to graphic design, but Escher must first convince his reluctant father, a practical engineer who wants Escher to gain solid vocational training, like his older brother who is going into geology. With Samuel as a mentor, Escher quickly masters the craft of woodcutting. But easily distracted from conventional work, Escher becomes particularly obsessed with repeating patterns, treating them like some sort of puzzle that gnaws away at his brain. He creates "Eight Heads" (1922) – a print with different heads that fit together perfectly in a repeating pattern. But he's not happy with it and neither is Samuel who feels that Escher has a good grounding of the basic techniques but is too "literary-philosophical" and lacking in feeling – "too little of an artist" – and so Samuel urges Escher to go forth and live life a little. Escher moves to Italy to learn to become more of a conventional "artist", while still holding onto his own personal mission (and distraction) of solving the puzzle of repeating patterns.

ESCHER'S TWO LOVES IN ITALY

Siena, Italy, 1924 – Escher has fallen absolutely in love with the Tuscan country-side. He spends his time sketching the beautiful landscapes, and his conventional artwork has improved significantly. He meets Jetta Umiker, his future wife. We see their courtship in one sweet scene that ends with him sketching the landscape in front of them on a piece of cloth and giving it to her so she could take the view with her. We jump to 1930, Escher and Jetta are married and live in Rome with their two sons (George 4, and Arthur 2). Escher is still struggling to find significant success as a conventional artist, but goes on long trips through the Italian countryside with a group of fellow artists for inspiration, leaving Jetta alone at home with the kids. We see that on these trips, in addition to sketching the beautiful Italian landscapes, he also spends time tinkering with his repeating patterns "puzzle" that he hasn't forgotten. Before one such trip when none of the friends could make it, Jetta urges Escher not to go – she wants him to focus on his conventional work and not leave her to take care of the family alone. But he insists, saying he

needs the time with the countryside to get inspiration and think (and focus on his unconventional “puzzle”).

ACT II

CASTROVALVA

Escher embarks on his solo trip through the Italian country-side, and it ends with him getting arrested in the town of Castrovalva due to a misunderstanding, leading to his most beautiful work from this time period, a conventional landscape of the town entitled “Castrovalva” (1930). This ushers in a period of moderate success for Escher, but after a few years, the political climate in Italy worsens under Mussolini, and when George (now 9) is required to wear the uniform of a Fascist youth organization, Escher decides to leave his beloved Italy and move his family to Switzerland.

DEPRESSED IN SWITZERLAND

Life is bad for the Eschers in Switzerland. Escher is depressed and uninspired without his beautiful Tuscan landscapes. Jetta is bored in the stuffy Swiss social circles. Money is tight. The family is in close quarters. Everyone gets on each others’ nerves. One night Escher can’t sleep. He hears Jetta brushing her hair and talks of how it reminds him of the ocean, how wonderful it is to be on the ocean, and how he misses it almost as much as he misses Italy. She takes out the cloth landscape drawing that he drew for her when they first met, puts it in his hands and says “I know what you have to do.” She tells him he needs to book a sea voyage and get away from Switzerland for a while. They can’t afford the tickets, so he writes a letter to a shipping company offering to do conventional prints for them in exchange for free passage, and it works. As the two start to plot out the different legs of his journey, it comes out that she assumes he’s going alone. When he says that they should both go, she says he should use all the tickets on himself because he really needs it. This makes him realize just how moody he’s been and what a bad husband he’s been. So he insists on them both going together.

INSPIRED AT THE ALHAMBRA

We catch up with M.C. and Jetta in Spain on their way to visit the Alhambra (an Arabic palace). They’ve already been traveling a couple of weeks and we see how many sketches he’s already made. And we establish that there is one place in Spain that she really wants to go after the Alhambra and she complains that so far on the trip he’s been ignoring what she wants to do. When they get to the Alhambra he is floored by the beautiful repeating patterns in the art and all over the walls. He rushes around like a giddy school child not caring how he looks to anyone around him, as she watches and laughs (both at him and with him). He tries to explain to her what it means to him and he shares a little of what’s going on in his head with his “puzzle”, but then she cuts him off at some point and lovingly says “stop trying to talk, just be in it.” He turns his attention to the Alhambra. The beautiful walls. The amazing repeating patterns. We take a dazzling visual tour through the surroundings and we see the designs come to life as his imagination plays with them, morphing, and repeating, and forming real objects playing off into infinity. When their time is up and they need to move on, on their way out M.C. urgently whips out his pencil to sketch one last pattern he sees on a wall. Seeing this, she turns around

and heads back into the Alhambra. He asks, “What are you doing? Did you forget something? Why are we going back in?” She tells him that she now realizes just how special this place is for him. She realizes that it’s a deeply impactful, inspiring place for Escher. A once in a lifetime experience. So they stay for the rest of the day. And they come back the next day and the day after. Several days pass with them running around the Alhambra together, working together to sketch every pattern they can find. They giggle. They’re happy-go-lucky. We haven’t seen them like this since they were in Italy.

NAZI OCCUPATION

Back in Switzerland, happier than before the trip, Escher works on his repeating patterns. But the impending Nazi invasion forces Escher to move back to Western Europe. Escher re-connects with his mentor Samuel and with his family. But after Escher shows his latest conventional works to his father and his father belittles it as “wallpaper”, he doesn’t feel comfortable showing his family the repeating pattern work that he’s been working on. And while he’s made clear progress on the repeating patterns, he’s still unhappy with it and stuck. The Nazis occupy the Netherlands, and arrest Samuel and have him killed. Escher retrieves Samuel’s art from his abandoned house and brings it to a local museum.

ACT III

METAMORPHOSIS

After the death of Samuel, Escher finally decides to show his repeating pattern work to his brother, the geologist, who to M.C.’s surprise, is instantly impressed. His brother reveals that M.C. has independently discovered certain principles of symmetry that have been pioneered in the academic science of crystallography. His brother provides him with a bunch of academic literature which greatly inspires Escher who finishes his repeating pattern masterpiece “Metamorphosis II” – gaining recognition among academic circles, and finally solving his repeating pattern “puzzle” to his satisfaction, and finding the voice of his art.

Appendix B - Filmography

Film Analysis #1: Filmography for M.C. Escher biopic by Jason Kessler

1. Seuss – unproduced screenplay on 2012 Blacklist written by Eyal Podell & Jonathan Stewart which chronicles the early days of Ted Geisel’s career and the inspiration his future wife, Helen, provided for him in creating his first hit, “The Cat in the Hat”
 - a. Artist creating a specific work
 - b. How a romantic relationship affects the artistic process
2. Steve Jobs (2015) – Biopic about Steve Jobs.
 - a. 3 acts that cover 14 years. Each act takes place immediately prior to the launch of a key product. I’m curious to check out this alternative structural approach to a biopic to explore the idea of doing something similar, structuring my story around specific pieces of art that Escher creates at different periods in his life
3. The Woman with Red Hair - unproduced screenplay on 2016 Blacklist about Johanna “Hannie” Schaft, a young woman who dropped out of college to join the Dutch Resistance during WWII, eventually becoming one of their most talented assassins and one of the Nazis’ most wanted enemies. Written by Michael Schatz. Repped by Bellevue Productions (Jeff Portnoy).
 - a. Escher lived through the Dutch Resistance during WWII so it could be useful to see a story play out in this world (although my story may not include this portion of Escher’s life)
4. Vincent & Theo – 1990 biographical film about the Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh and his brother Theo. Vincent’s talent was unrecognized during his lifetime and he survived on his brother’s charity. Spans 1883 – 1891, mostly in Paris it seems. Written by Julian Mitchell.
 - a. Dutch artist, like Escher, but different time period and mostly takes place in different location than where Escher lived
 - b. Touches on theme of an artist surviving on the charity of a family member
5. Queen of Hearts – unproduced screenplay on 2013 Blacklist (and winner of 2013 Nicholl Fellowship) about how a passionate affair that leaves author Lewis Carroll brokenhearted prompts him to craft Alice in Wonderland
 - a. Artist creating a specific work
 - b. How a romantic relationship affects the artistic process
6. The Boy and his Tiger – unproduced screenplay on 2012 Blacklist written by Dan Dollar
 - a. Biopic about an artist going through the creative process
 - b. The subject is someone whose art we know well, but don’t know much about his life
 - c. Subject was somewhat reclusive, had nonconformist tendencies
7. The Imitation Game – 2014 film about Alan Turing trying to crack the enigma code
 - a. Quirky intellectual obsessed with solving a problem for its own sake / has parallels to Escher’s approach to his art and obsession with solving certain puzzles
8. Girl with a Pearl Earring – 2003 film directed by Peter Webber. Screenplay adapted by Olivia Hetreed based on novel. About girl who posed for Vermeer’s painting. Used distinctive lighting

and colour schemes similar to Vermeer's paintings. Nominated for three Academy Awards and two Golden Globes. Takes place in 17th century in Dutch Republic

- a. About an artist creating a specific work
 - b. In Dutch Republic, but totally different time period so setting is likely not that applicable
9. Pollock – 2000 biographical film about Jackson Pollock. Set in 1950s U.S.
- a. About an artist
10. The Theory of Everything – 2014 film about Steven Hawking
- a. Biopic that seems to span a long period of time
11. Liberty - unproduced screenplay on 2016 Blacklist about Frederic Auguste Bartholdi, the French sculptor who designed, built and delivered the Statue of Liberty.
- a. About an artist creating a specific work
12. The End of the Tour – 2015 film about David Foster Wallace and a writer who interviewed him. Jumps in time.
- a. Might provide useful look at an alternative structure that uses an interviewer relationship to frame the story
13. Voyagers – unproduced screenplay on 2016 Blacklist about the love story between Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan
- a. Biopic about intellectual problem solvers, told through the frame of a love story
14. Jackie – 2016 – biopic about Jackie Kennedy

Appendix C – New Rebecca Scene 1

INT. DE MESQUITA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

De Mesquita's wife ELISABETH (60s) unpacks wheat, potatoes, and other supplies from Escher's bag.

JAAP (40s, De Mesquita's son) plays a card game with his daughter REBECCA (9, alert eyes, emotionally mature beyond her years).

They're all remarkably thin. Their clothes loose.

De Mesquita holds up a copy of *Day and Night*.

DE MESQUITA
Beautiful. One of my favorites.

ESCHER
I'm bringing more of them to Klaus, so I made an extra for you.

DE MESQUITA
Thank you.

Escher puts an APPLE on the table in front of Rebecca.

ESCHER
Jan made me promise to give you that. And he made you this.

Escher gives Rebecca a piece of paper with a child's DRAWING of two CHILDREN with a SMALL BROWN ANIMAL.

REBECCA
That's so sweet. Please thank him for me.

JAAP
Is that a dog?

ESCHER
A porcupine.

REBECCA
I love it.

DE MESQUITA
Come, let me steal our guest so Rebecca can resume beating you.

Jaap scrunches his face at Rebecca, playfully competitive, as De Mesquita waves Escher to follow him into the other room.

But Elisabeth grabs Escher's arm before he can go.

ELISABETH
(re: the groceries)
Thank you.

ESCHER
Of course.

A brief moment acknowledges the gravity of their situation before Escher follows his mentor into the other room.

Appendix D – New Rebecca Scene 2

INT. DE MESQUITA'S STUDIO - DAY

A neat orderly studio, similar to Escher's.

Rebecca sits at a table drawing a picture, while Escher wanders the room, looking at PRINTS hanging on the walls.

De Mesquita enters.

DE MESQUITA
Rebecca, they're ready for you.

REBECCA
I'm almost done.

Escher stares at a PRINT of a man and woman huddled together surrounded by a crowd of people with strange faces.

ESCHER
Is this you and Elisabeth?

DE MESQUITA
Perhaps in our fatter days.

They share a smile.

JAAP (O.S.)
Rebecca!

Jaap pokes his head in, looking a bit nervous.

JAAP
Come on. It's time to go.

REBECCA
One second.

She finishes a final section of her drawing while Jaap battles his patience.

DE MESQUITA
You can't rush art, Jaap.

ESCHER
It's true.

JAAP
You're not helping, dad.

REBECCA
Okay I'm done.

Rebecca hands Escher the finished drawing.
It shows a boy and girl sitting on a cloud in
a blue sky.

ESCHER
Beautiful.

REBECCA
This is for Jan, will you give it
to him?

ESCHER
Of course.

Rebecca lifts a bag starts toward her father.

ESCHER
Wait, she should take some supplies
with her, no? To practice her art?

DE MESQUITA
Good idea.

De Mesquita and Escher scoop up some paper
and drawing materials and add them to her
bag.

INT. DE MESQUITA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Escher, De Mesquita, Elizabeth and Jaap look
on as Sophie squats by the back door so she's
at Rebecca's height.

SOPHIE
Tell me one more time?

REBECCA
My name is Anika Visser. You're my
mother. We live in Amsterdam, and
we were visiting grandma and
grandpa.

Jaap bends down to give his daughter one more
final goodbye.

JAAP
I'm sorry. I'm so sorry this is
the world you know. I love you.

He squeezes her tightly, tears in his eyes.

De Mesquita puts his hand on Escher's back.
Whispers...

DE MESQUITA
Thank you.

Appendix E – New Jetta Sequence

EXT. HAARLEM STREETS - DAY

A grey, overcast day. Pedestrians in gloomy moods. Jetta holds a few BAGS of supplies and Escher carries FIREWOOD.

JETTA
(checking the bags)
We got the beans -- rice -- we just need the butter.

ESCHER
Isn't it awful?

JETTA
Oh shoot, I don't have the rations card.

ESCHER
Jetta, isn't it awful?

She shifts the bags around and checks her coat pockets.

JETTA
About Rebecca? Horrifying. The poor girl.

Jetta finds the rations card in a pocket.

JETTA
Oh here it is!

A NAZI TRUCK SCREECHES to a stop outside a FLOWER SHOP.

Escher and Jetta watch as NAZI SOLDIERS rush inside and moments later drag out a FLORIST (20s, male) and force him into the back of the truck.

The FLORIST'S WIFE (20s) rushes out of the shop.

FLORIST'S WIFE
No please! He converted. Please! This is a mistake.

Jetta instinctively steps forward but Escher grabs her arm. Other bystanders also watch, all staying at a safe distance.

A SOLDIER emerges from the shop carrying a YOUNG BOY (7) kicking and screaming.

JETTA

Oh God.

The FLORIST'S WIFE'S face contorts in panic. She tries to pull the Boy from the Soldier, until the Soldier finally BACKHANDS her across the face, sending her to the ground.

Jetta and Escher flinch as the woman is struck. They cling to each other.

The Nazi Truck pulls away, leaving behind the woman on the ground, crying.

Jetta rushes over to the woman and consoles her. Other Bystanders join in comforting her.

Escher watches. Frozen in place. Disturbed.

INT. ESCHER'S STUDIO - NIGHT

BACH plays. Escher works at his drawing table. Struggles. Can't concentrate. Puts down his pencil.

Jetta enters and instantly reads him. Rubs his shoulder.

ESCHER

That woman. And the little boy.

JETTA

If they ever came for our boys... I can't even imagine.

ESCHER

I keep thinking about Rebecca.

Jetta sits on the couch. Sighs.

JETTA

I think you should talk to your brother.

ESCHER

You do?

JETTA

Of course. It's Rebecca.

Escher joins her on the couch and they hug.

ESCHER

I won't let him get me involved.
I'll just pass it along.

JETTA

Just -- be careful.

They hold hands in silence as the MUSIC
plays. She lays her head on his shoulder.

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